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"Breaking Barriers in Teaching and Learning" - Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

At times, when honors education comes up in academic or popular conversations, a common and automatic response seems to prevail: an assumption that honors means faster, broader, more complicated, and more expert delivery of content information on the part of the teacher and greater, more efficient acquisition of disciplinary knowledge and higher achievement on tests or essays on the part of the student. What the instructor teaches in terms of countable amounts of information and what the student produces in terms of quantitatively measurable outcomes rule the day.

For those of us who have long dedicated our teaching and scholarly careers to honors, such hegemonic assumptions are problematic barriers that run counter to what we often espouse as philosophy and practice in our honors work, and they are worth challenging. For us, content knowledge and learning outcomes are certainly important and unavoidably necessary in today's higher education climate of auditive assessments, "outputs," and "returns on investment." But the most transformative value of our dedication to honors depends equally on *what* we teach, complemented by *how* and *why* we teach in a way that challenges students to learn in deep, meaningful, connected, and lasting ways. In other words, process is our game, playing just as crucial a role in stepping up students' learning as delivery of fundamental knowledge and skills. Never a community to accept false dichotomies, honors people understand that process and product are interdependent. Yet, honors is about taking risks in pedagogical approaches, course design, and curricular programming to bridge process and outcomes. Honors inspires us to think about how to teach more actively to make a real difference in student learning. Honors helps us better understand how and why students learn more significantly when we engage them in not only remembering content information but also learning how to learn differently in creative, integrative,

interdisciplinary ways. Honors is about breaking perceived barriers in teaching and learning.

The Teaching and Learning Committee of the National Collegiate Honors Council has long recognized that the fundamental mission of honors education centers on the power of excellence in teaching and learning in all our endeavors inside and outside the classroom. What we deem as vital dimensions of the honors enterprise—both philosophical and practical—should be the imperatives that drive all our teaching, all our courses and programs, all of our students’ learning experiences. We have often heard the fair question, “If what we do in honors is so enriching and effective, why aren’t we doing it in all our educational efforts?” Indeed. While numerous factors exist that require differentiation in our schools and that make the individuation of diverse students a positive approach to educating our societies inclusively, we agree that honors has much to contribute to our larger community of teachers and learners. We believe that the essays in this volume have wider application beyond the honors classroom or program, and we hope that readers—within and outside of honors—will adapt and use the various ideas, practical approaches, experiences, and models shared in the various chapters. We hope that the front-cover image of Matisse’s 1916 painting *The Piano Lesson* will inspire us to reflect on how the incalculable influence of the instructor-mentor stems not from barriers of superior knowledge or constructions of power but from patience, caring, high expectations, appreciation for diverse talents, expert guidance, and love of teaching and learning in honors and beyond.

Breaking Barriers

The first section, “Breaking Barriers with Significant Student Learning,” explores several specific techniques teachers can apply to almost any course. In the first chapter, retired faculty development director Barbara J. Millis articulates a model of questioning in which students generate and then discuss their own questions. She also describes three creative ways for implementing those student-generated questions. Leslie G. Kaplan of the University of North Florida builds on Millis’s insights by reviewing the literature

on innovative discussion-based practices before describing several innovations of her own. Susan E. Dinan of Pace University offers an analysis of two distinct approaches to linked classes and learning communities, both of which enrich the first-semester experience of students in valuable ways. In the final chapter of this section, Dahl-iani Reynolds, Meg Case, and Becky Spritz return to the classroom to show how linked classes at Roger Williams University not only create unique opportunities for engaged student learning but also help an honors program create its own identity.

“Breaking Barriers with Faculty Development and Teaching Excellence,” the second section, details a number of methods for enhancing teaching through faculty development. It begins with Hanne ten Berge and Rob van der Vaart of Utrecht University in The Netherlands and their account of a professional development course about honors teaching. They argue persuasively that the same principles that guide teaching and learning in honors classes—principles such as academic challenge, the importance of learning communities, and substantial freedom for students—should guide faculty development courses. Evidence from three such courses at Utrecht University supports their arguments. In a similar vein, Milton D. Cox of Miami University describes the power that faculty learning communities (FLCs) have for transforming faculty and their teaching. Such a community is both an ideal way to bring new faculty into honors education and an excellent approach for existing honors faculty to refine their own methods and courses. In Chapter Seven, Columbia College’s John Zubizarreta, a Carnegie Foundation/CASE U.S. Professor of the Year, demonstrates the value of the honors professional development portfolio for documenting accomplishments and meeting the goals of tenure and promotion. The greatest value of such a portfolio, however, is its capacity for facilitating deep reflection and collaboration in faculty development.

Presumably most faculty want to be better teachers, but how do we know which practices are truly effective? Todd D. Zakrajsek of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Janina Tosic of the University of Applied Sciences Niederrhein, Krefeld, Germany,

offer several metacognitive strategies to help identify such practices, dispelling several myths about teaching and learning along the way. Replacing those myths with evidence-based educational practices will make us all better teachers and learners.

The third section, “Course Designs and Case Studies in Honors Teaching,” highlights a variety of different classes and approaches to great teaching. While these case studies all emerge from an honors environment, the lessons learned apply to all sorts of courses. The University of South Alabama’s Annmarie Guzy presents a useful model for a composition course, with a roadmap for how such a course can support a research-based curriculum. Matthew Carey Jordan analyzes two courses designed to build community at Auburn University at Montgomery, one that combines multiple honors seminars into a new and larger course and another that uses cultural experiences, service learning, or a book-of-the-month club in order to provide students maximum flexibility. In both cases, thinking differently about what honors should be enables a teacher to make the most of existing resources. In Chapter Eleven, Ken R. Mulliken of Southern Oregon University describes a U.S. history course, “Perspectives on Twentieth-Century American Identity.” Its unique assignments and creative approach could be the basis for a number of interesting courses in different disciplines, not just American history. Finally, in Chapter Twelve, Rogers State University’s James Ford develops three different approaches to varying the classroom experience. Taken together, these examples and techniques suggest the many ways that transformative teaching and learning can break barriers in education.

All of the contributions to this volume inspire us to retool the ways in which we teach and create curriculum and to rethink our assumptions about learning. Collectively, they challenge us to deconstruct perceptions that just because we teach, students learn; that our disciplinary training makes us automatically effective teachers; that rigor is a function of amount and difficulty of work rather than complexity and integration of work; and that students learn in uniform ways. Responding to the challenges presented directly or indirectly by the contents of our volume requires that

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we remain open to breaking barriers that prevent us from achieving the highest goals of honors education. Breaking free of barriers allows us to use our new skills, our adjusted ways of thinking about teaching and learning, and our new freedoms to innovate as starting points for enhancing the learning of our honors students and, by extension, all our students.

John Zubizarreta and James Ford

1 September 2018

